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## State estimates Libby medical costs at \$32.2 million

HELENA (AP) — A new state study shows medical costs for people sickened by asbestos exposure in Libby could top \$32.2 million over the next five years.

The report, paid for by Gov. Judy Martz's office, was presented Thursday to a task force of government and medical workers formed two years ago to determine the costs of treating ill Libby residents.

According to the study, medical costs could run as high as \$90 million between 2005 and 2009, but are more likely to be \$32.2 million, although even that figure could be a bit high.

Presenter Jim Buck said the study didn't account for any deaths from asbestos exposure.

Of the \$32.2 million in estimated costs, about \$10.5 million will be covered by W.R. Grace & Co., the bankrupt owner of the former vermiculite mine blamed for hundreds of asbestos-related illnesses and deaths in the Libby area.

W.R. Grace hired Health Network America to cover the medical costs of sickened residents who promised not to sue the company.

Residents not covered by W.R.

Grace comprise the rest of the projected \$21.7 million. Some of those people are covered by Medicaid or Medicare. Others pay for themselves or are treated for free at the Libby hospital as a charity.

Jean Branscum, Martz's health care policy adviser, said the study is significant because it shows how much money is still needed to care for sickened residents.

"That's the purpose of this two-year stint," she told task force members. "Where's the gap and who can plug the gap?"

Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., has suggested creating a medical bill trust fund for Libby.

For years, Libby was home to a vermiculite mine that provided materials used for insulation and other products. But the ore contained harmful tremolite asbestos, and has been blamed for hundreds of illnesses and at least 200 deaths in the Libby area. The mine operated from 1963 to 1990.

Cleanup work began in April 2000 and Libby was declared a federal Superfund site in 2002.

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